

On the Road.

IT is a great thing to live near the high road, if you happen to be a student of human nature, and the road leads straight from anywhere to London town. Shut up within so many feet of park paling, enclosed by the respectable hedge of a secluded villa residence, one is in danger of losing touch with humanity (with a capital H.). Humanity, indeed, comes to the front door to pay calls and collect subscriptions, or to the back door to vend small wares and demand alms, but in either case the visits are professional and perfunctory.

Society in the country is a trifle dull. The parson, the doctor, the well-fed, well-satisfied young men and women, whose mental vision would appear to be bounded by the four white lines of the tennis-court, are all of one type; you meet them in every county in England. You meet them in the pages of innumerable novels and magazines. You learn to anticipate their movements, their manners; when they open their lips to speak, you know what they are going to say. There is about them a sameness which detracts from their interest as human beings. They are exclusive too, clinging to their own little sets, and very distrustful of the stranger within their gates, especially of a stranger who is more than suspected of "writing for the papers." For them, the press, like the stage, savours of immorality, and they are never wholly certain that a "literary person" can be—"well, really *quite* respectable, you know."

Lastly, and this is the worst of them, they are, to all appearance, fixed and permanent. They go on marrying each other, and reproducing their type with an exactitude which threatens to last as long as the world itself.

But on the road, the student of human nature may find another society, which is not in the least permanent, and the type whereof

is constantly changing. It also is a society of cliques and sets, varying from respectable travellers, with the price of a bed in their pockets, to candidates for the nearest "casual," or the chance shelter of an empty outhouse; but it is much more genial and amusing than its stationary prototype in the red brick villas. It responds to your sympathy and interest; it will unfold its story for your delectation, and should hard fact have confined its experiences to the strictly unromantic, it will on occasion supplement their recital with the most delightful lies.

It comprises men and women of every shade of character, and its history ranges from grimmest tragedy to the broad humours of the jolly beggar and out-and-out scamp.

I remember the raw cold of the bitter winter evening on which I met, almost barefoot and literally in rags, what had once been—

"A gentleman of England,
Cleanly bred, machinely crammed,"

and an officer in Her Majesty's Service.

There were many missing links in the chain which fate had forged from the quarter-deck to the casual ward, but this much I learned: he had had "chances," and had thrown them away.

"I've no one to blame but myself, and it is too late now. I've gone so far that I can't get back. After all, it doesn't matter. My people think I'm dead, and I hope to God I shall be soon." I thought it did matter, and said so. An hour later, I saw him coming out of a public-house, and wondered whether I had not after all done good that evil might come. He looked almost happy. The devil which had dragged him down was again singing its syren song in his ears. He straightened himself, thrust his hands into his pockets, stepped out, and lurched heavily against the adjoining wall. Perhaps, as he had said, it was "too late." But, ah me! the pity of it.

There are certain expressions familiar to the pamphlet and platform of philanthropy, the use of which is not considered etiquette on the road. If you forget this fact, you are likely to receive a reminder in the shape of a quiet but unmistakable reproof.

It was once my good fortune to foregather with a gentleman who resembled nothing but an animated scarecrow, and he was kind enough to favour me with the story of his life. The recital lasted half-an-hour, and comprised the concentrated material for at least three shilling shockers. He had been a gardener, nay, head gardener to Mr. O'Brien, of Bally-something Castle, county Cork (the locality is not to be found on the map), and the trusted

servant and factotum of Sir D—— F——, whose name figures in the pages of Burke, and is therefore not to be given in full.

From this proud position, a series of wholly unmerited misfortunes had reduced him to travelling on foot through the lanes of Surrey, in company with a hamper of the commoner varieties of fern. He had buried a wife and nine children, and was in dire need of rest and refreshment, having journeyed "from Bagshot on an empty stomach," which, to say the least, could not have been a comfortable form of progression. The distance was preposterous, and I said incautiously—

"You've never tramped all that way in twenty-four hours?"

"Were you manin' *walked* now?" he replied, with a mildly reproachful emphasis on the active verb. "Sure, and I have walked from Bagshot, and I am sixty-four."

I apologised on the spot. He was a very dignified scarecrow, who professed to know the name of every fern in the United Kingdom; and sold me a *Blechnum*, which he called a *Trichomanes*, to prove the accuracy of the assertion.

Six months after, I met him in the neighbourhood of Guildford. He did not recognise me, and told me his story over again. It was a revised edition. There were now seven children, three living, one a cripple, and all were dependent on their aged father. Bally-something Castle was removed from Cork to Clare, and Sir D—— F—— had been raised to the peerage. Several of the most striking incidents of his truly remarkable career had gained in force and effective detail. It was a very telling story. The scarecrow called upon the host of heaven to bear witness to its accuracy.

"I wudn't decave a mole, an' sure it's the truth I'm tellin' you. I am an Oirishman, though ye moight not belave ut by token of my spache."

I did believe it, for I have heard speeches from Irish members who dealt with facts much as did my friend the scarecrow. The style is unmistakable, likewise the veracity. I gave him a small donation. He felt himself entitled to a more generous recognition, and argued the point, but I did not agree, and left him cursing fluently.

The first acquaintance I ever made on the road was a perfect physical example of a certain type; the type of the unmitigated blackguard. His name was Richard Jones, and his face was that of a half-bred bulldog suffering from an attack of mumps. I met him on a certain afternoon in late October. There had been a magisterial inquiry into a case of manslaughter, and the dull little country town was ablaze with excitement. A woman, in respect-

able circumstances, had by systematic ill-treatment caused the death of a wretched little servant girl, and a virtuously indignant populace had thronged the market-place to howl execration on the culprit. It was the first time I had heard the people "give tongue," and I went down to make the most of a new experience.

In the red dusk of the fading sunset, a sea of black heads surged and tossed about a four-wheeled cab, for which eight or ten constables were trying to clear a passage through the crowd. A policeman sat on the box beside the driver, and two more kept guard over their prisoner inside. There were authoritative shouts, the crack of a whip, a momentary scatter in the immediate vicinity of the horse's hoofs, and then arose a dull hoarse roar, gradually swelling into a very hell of inarticulate sound.

The light of a street lamp flashed for a second over a woman's face, white and open-mouthed, and on the blue uniform of a stalwart inspector who leaned forward, barring the window with his arm, then the black sea closed in, and above the tumult of voices rose ominous yells of "Turn it over."

I asked a man standing beside me if he thought the police were strong enough to hold the crowd. He answered that there was "no blooming fear," and straightway uplifted his voice in anathemas of marvellous force and variety. The cab turned the corner of the street, pursued by a gradual diminuendo of abuse, and my neighbour spat upon the pavement and inquired whether I would give him a pair of old trousers, because his throat was as dry as a limekiln. I was unable to supply the garments he desired, but saw my way to relieving the cause of his immediate distress. In return for the price of a drink, he accompanied me home, considerably suggesting that it was late for me to be alone on foot, "with so many rough characters about."

Next morning I encountered in the course of my wanderings a short, thick-set, disreputable ruffian, clad in frayed and shapeless garments, which had once been black, but were green and greasy with age and hard wear. The ragged frock coat, buttoned up to the dirty birdseye neckerchief, suggested an absence of cleanly linen beneath.

He bade me "Good-day," touching the brim of his battered hat, and as I looked inquiringly into the heavy mottled face, with its bulbous nose and pendulous lower lip, the little bleared eyes twinkled knowingly, and I recognised, with something of a shock, my acquaintance of the previous evening. We had a short conversation, one of many, in the course of which I learned that he had in years gone by been a porter in the employ of the S. E. R.

His was a common story. Drink had been his ruin. He had lost through that fatal thirst his berth, his home, and his character. He had driven his long-suffering wife to seek protection at the hands of the law, and had sunk step by step to be a wretched vagabond, without hope or desire for reformation. But he was a vagabond with a strong sense of humour, and his personal appearance was hideous to the verge of fascination, for which reason I regarded him with interest, and looked forward to seeing him again.

For a month or so he would disappear entirely, then one day I would meet him lounging along the road with his hands in his pockets, dirtier, more disreputable than ever, and he would stop and inquire how I "was getting on." It was a purely social acquaintance. He never failed to recognise me, and he never asked me for money. Sometimes he merely touched his hat, sometimes he stopped for a little conversation. He had an etiquette of his own to which he rigidly adhered. He would only speak to me when he was sober. I found this out when, after a prolonged absence, I chanced one day to disregard his silent greeting, and asked him where he had been. He replied—

"I can't talk to you to-day; I'm drunk, and it ain't fitting."

I took the hint and waited in future for him to speak first.

About Christmas, '91, he vanished from the scene, and for months I saw him no more. When at last we met again, I hardly recognised him. He was clean, he was shaven, he wore a tidy suit of fustian, and he was wheeling a light handcart laden with bundles of firewood. He appeared very much ashamed of his changed aspect, and confessed with evident humiliation that the long winter had proved too much for him. Illness and want had driven him to "the House," and he was now an inmate of the R— Union. Perhaps I secretly sympathised with his chagrin. With the loss of his freedom and dirt, the charm of his unfettered blackguardism had vanished. He had become respectable, even as other men, and—respectability is a terrible leveller.

L. GALBRAITH.